

Were the middle ages
really dark?



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Historians refer to the period between the fall of the Roman Empire to the Renaissance as the Middle Ages. It is often referred to as the Dark Ages. This specific name was given by Francesco Petrarca, an Italian Renaissance scholar, in order to denounce Latin literature which was common during this time period. The name also implies that there was little improvements and developments in comparison to those of the Renaissance's "age of rebirth." It has also been defined as a period of little or no recorded historical documentation. In contrast, historical information is now becoming available and has identified that this was not the case. In Sarah Pruitt's "6 Reasons the Dark Ages were not so Dark," she stated "the negative view of the so-called "Dark Ages" became popular largely because most of the written records of the time (including St. Jerome and St. Patrick in the fifth century, Gregory of Tours in the sixth and Bede in the eighth) had a strong Rome-centric bias." With recorded history being dominated by the Roman Catholic Church, a historical era had been misinterpreted. To understand why it should no longer be referred to as Dark Age, we must look at the events and circumstance of the time period.

At the beginning, the Middle Ages experienced the destruction of the Roman Empire and the barbarian invasions. Buildings, farming, art, and the Roman scientific advances along with its aqueducts were destroyed. In John Bryan Ward-Perkins' *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization*, he explains "that this means a clear decline in material culture and technical capacity between the later Roman era and the seventh century." *Slate Magazine's* "Why Are the Middle Ages Often Characterized as Dark or Less Civilized?" postulated that

when the whole infrastructure of the earlier culture falls apart under a complex combination of economic and political failures and your region is assailed on all sides from successive waves of invaders and wracked internally by political division and warfare, there tend to be more important things to apply that intelligence to than building aqueducts or translating Aristotle from the Greek.” One would agree that society must first address rebuilding (Slate)

The first area to be addressed was farming. As a result of the barbarian invasions, there was little or no trade. To feed the populations, farmers had to improve their agricultural techniques. One of the agricultural inventions was the horse collar and horseshoes which improved the plowing of fields. The farmers also built watermills for flour production. This became the model for the invention of windmills. According to *World History*, “the windmill was created to replace animal power in grinding grain. Like a watermill, the windmill could grind at least 1, 000 bushels of grain per week and 6 bushels an hour based on the performance of the wind.” The art of farming was being revolutionized. Another factor facilitating the improvements in farming was Europe’s weather. During the Middle Ages, Europe experience one of its best weather cycles. This event accelerated the production of crops. Farming was not the only area that experienced new inventions. The mechanical clock, eyeglasses, gunpowder weapons, and the printing press were invented at this time.

Prior to the Middle Ages, kingdoms had been ruled by emperors, kings, or queens who were endowed with limitless power, whatever they ordered was the rule of the land. The destruction of the Roman Empire saw the

elimination of these unlimited powerful kingdoms. Over time, a new civilization developed, and it was dominated by the Roman Catholic Church. Religion became the focal point of life in the Middle Ages. The feudal system was developed as a new form of government with its three-tier society; nobles, clergy, and peasant. Power was no longer the monopoly of kings or queens. Instead, it was bestowed on them by the church. During the Middle Ages, the Magna Carta, one of the most important historical documents, was written. Under the guidance of the church, it outlined that everyone was subject to the rule of law. It also stated the rights of the individual for justice and fair trial. In the future, this document would become a model for democratic governments.

In the Middle Ages, the church controlled every aspect of society and everything was done for the glory of god. Orchestrated by the Pope, the head of the Roman Catholic Church, churches, libraries, and monasteries were built for the glory of God. During this period, Gothic architecture was developed. Its churches were architectural wonders filled with religious themed paintings, woven tapestries, and sculptures. The arts flourished and were also enhanced with epics and ballads from illiterate peasants reciting stories of historic battles, romance, and adventure. This period also saw the writing masterpieces of Dante and Chaucer, the sculptures of Donatello, and the paintings of Giotto and Bencivieni di Pepo. As portrayed by historians, this was not the Dark Age, but an era filled with progress and advancements.

In 800 A. D, Charlemagne was crowned by the pope as Holy Roman Emperor. According to Pruitt, he

worked to uphold this lofty distinction, building a strong centralized state, fostering a rebirth of Roman-style architecture, promoting educational reform and ensuring the preservation of classic Latin texts. One of the advancements was “ the introduction of a standard handwriting script, known as Carolingian miniscule (Pruitt)

As a result, it accelerated the production of books and other documents. He together with the support from the Roman Catholic Church were responsible for the creation of universities. After the barbarian invasions, Europe was plagued with various Latin dialects. Charlemagne was responsible for preserving Latin as the cultured language. During his reign, foundations for classical music were developed. Pruitt further stated that “ though the Carolingian dynasty had dissolved by the end of the ninth century (Charlemagne himself died in 814), his legacy would provide the foundations—including books, schools, curricula and teaching techniques—for the Renaissance and other later cultural revivals.” This time period was the beginning of the society’s pursuit of the arts and sciences.

The period had a long span from the 5th century to the 15th century. As civilization was rebuilt, it experienced several religious wars and diseases. As a whole, the society had a healthy diet of vegetables, bread, and some meat but no sugar. Despite healthy food choices, their life span was about 31. 5 years. Deaths occurred from child birth, war, or plagues. A major plague, the Black Death, reduced the European population by 1/3. The major wars were called the Crusades and were initiated by the Pope. Their purpose was to regain control of Jerusalem and the Holy Land from the infidels, the Arabic empire. Despite these setbacks, civilization continued to develop. In fact, the <https://assignbuster.com/were-the-middle-ages-really-dark/>

Crusaders returned home with Arabic customs, music, art, spices and mathematics that would be incorporated into the European culture. During the Medieval Age, algebra had been developed by the Arab nations. It was the incorporation of this knowledge into the Medieval universities that would provide the foundations for further scientific developments.

In summary, the people living in the Middle Ages were smart and resourceful. They addressed their immediate need for survival, established a civilization and a culture based on strong religious beliefs, and a feudal system of government which was necessary to provide protection and reinforce the rebuilding efforts. It took some time, but their culture and technology flourished. It is certainly evident that this period was incorrectly named the Dark Ages. In “ 5 Things You (Probably) Didn’t Know about the Dark Ages,” Dr. Janina Ramirez stated, “ a very quick glance at the remarkable manuscripts, metalwork, texts, buildings and individuals that saturate the early medieval period reveals that ‘ Dark Age’ is now very much an out-of-date term.” In a society where the majority of their wooden housing structures were destroyed, modern-day archaeologists are digging to uncover the treasures of this era. Whether it is manuscripts buried in monastery walls or jewelry and pottery hidden at burial sites, medieval culture is being exposed for what it was which is not a dark age. Historians have gathered Medieval artifacts and now have a better understanding of the richness of its accomplishments. To reiterate, the improvements in farming, innovative art and architecture, a stable society governed by religious beliefs, the founding of universities and convents for the education of women, writing improvements, and scientific discoveries were an

enlightened time and facilitated the movement necessary for the beginning of the Renaissance era. Historical research has validated that this was not the Dark Ages but the beginning of the European civilization.

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